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AUTHOR Bryant, Donald C.
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ABSTRACT

Through personal reminiscences, the author offers a retrospective view of the first fifty years of the activities of the Central States Speech Association. Reflecting on past papers and convention programs, the author calls attention to the proliferation and diversification of interests in speech communication's instructional and investigative activities and while lamenting the decline in rhetorical studies, points out that they have always had a salutary power of comeback. (HOD)

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for CSSA's Fiftieth Anniversary, 10 April 1981

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THE FIRST FIFTY YEARS ARE THE HARDEST: A Retrospective View

for CSSA's Fiftieth Anniversary, 10 April 1981

by

Donald C. Bryant, President SAA-SCA 1973

For this semi-centennial epideictic occasion, we three ex-presidents of the Speech Communication Association from the Middlewest are commanded by your Big Brother in Washington (or near it) to celebrate with you the passing of your youth, the onset of your maturity, and the prospect of eternal prime-of-life, qualified only by the remote technical possibility of premature senility. One of us is a well established citizen of the sunset republic of Emeritria. The other two are getting on well with their catechism for naturalization. We are the ancients, full of the notorious wisdom thereof, the sober celebrants from whom the headnote to the program promises you reflections on landmark developments in our professions during the first half-century of the CSSA, and speculations on the future of what we profess--and perhaps even perform. Such inflated billing! But Why not? Nestors, the wise old owls, may be pundits too and may fake the roles of seers and prophets or be just nostalgiacs posing as keepers of the values of the past.

So, you may expect history and reminiscence--interesting and curious passages of which you've already had from Professor Auer-- anecdotal autobiography, recollections of the good old times and reconstructions of them closer to our hearts' desire (and possibly even yours), prophecy and other species of clairvoyance, and of course advice, recommendation, and doubtless

timely warnings. Though we may be as ambiguous and cryptic as the Delphic oracle, perhaps we can hold off from the Crack-of-Doom voice of Cassandra. From me you'll get antiquarian reminiscence, of course, and perhaps advice and at least hopes for the future. To my colleagues I have assigned wisdom and prophecy.

The Central States Association and my experience with our professional associations are not quite coeval. I got my start a year before the CSSA was born, and it was eight years before I launched myself upon its fresh, clear waters. I gave my first convention paper fifty-one years ago this month at Princeton University on the program of our oldest association, the Eastern Public Speaking Conference, Hoyt Hudson President. That association had been founded at Swarthmore College in 1910, five years before the organization of our national association. It was the predecessor of the Speech Association of the Eastern States, now called, the Eastern Communication Association.

Attacking my box of old records and forgotten residua in quest of memorabilia for this occasion, I found a fair copy--the latest, I assume, of many revisions--of the paper which in the presumption of my twenty-fifth year, I presented that day, "The Criticism of Oratory." Change Oratory to Rhetoric or Public Address, and we still have a new one of those somewhere in the nation every month or two! As I reread it, curiously I was not ashamed. In it I find self-assured declaration of much that I have heard and read form others and myself over the past half century--over the

lifetime of the Central States Speech Association. The paper took its impetus, apparently, from the 1925 essay on "The Literary Criticism of Oratory" by Herbert Wichelns, under whose direction I was to complete work for the A.M. degree in Public Speaking at Cornell that summer. In the paper I took a complementary position to Wichelns' and examined the rhetorical criticism of oratory in contemporary popular and learned writing (the latter, of course, in the Quarterly Journal of Speech, where else?)--that is, criticism of speeches primarily as speeches and not as documents or as candidates for examination as literature. That issue today, I sense faintly, is not altogether dead. My findings and my lines of argument would not surprise any of you who have had forced upon you some acquaintance with the development of our half-century of rhetorical studies, or more recently have read the late Marie Hochmuth Nichols of Illinois or have had the corrective of Edwin Black of Wisconsin programmed into your computers.

I'll not digest the paper, though of course it would be good for the cause if I did, but will only mention my concluding prescriptions for rhetorical criticism of speeches and of public address in the press: That it should pay primary but not exclusive attention to a speaker's or writer's leading ideas and principal kinds of argument; that it should examine and assess the development and organization of the substance (I didn't expicitly take refuge in the Ciceronian offices!); then style; and of course setting, circumstances, environment, nature of audience-speaker

relationships; and throughout, relations of substance, form, style, mode, and technique to the prevailing social idiom and climate of opinion (I did not know about Gallup, Roper, et al.).

I have no record of the other papers in rhetoric and public address which came along in the wake (or perhaps as the prelude) to my star performance. I do know that afterwards neither Andrew Weaver, the Editor of the Quarterly Journal of Speech, nor anyone else clamored for publication rights. And I recall only one response, a charmingly friendly and ambiguous remark after the program by Everett Hunt, any attention from whom, of course, I would take as a compliment. "Good, Bryant," I think he said, "I see you are still fighting the battle of content and form, of the substance of oratory and the techniques of performance." I wasn't sure whether he thought I had come down on the side of ideas or of instruments--on his side or James M. O'Neill's in the running argument they had been carrying on in the pages of the Quarterly Journal of Speech and on convention platforms for some time. As Wichelns later characterized the debate and the debaters in his fiftieth anniversary History of the Speech Association of the Eastern States (1959, p.6):

> [At the 1923 meeting in conjunction with the national association] the Eastern leaders confronted in person the leaders from the midwest in the 'form versus content' controversy which was speerheaded by James M. O'Neill's attack on Everett Hunt, then President of the Eastern.
>
> Involved was the speech teacher's interpretation of the range of his responsibility. O'Neill would take the student as he was and develop his ability to communicate his present thought by giving him better technical command

> of the resources of expression. Hunt wished to stimulate thinking, give wider perspective and deeper insight; in consequence he put less stress on technical improvement. O'Neill was concerned to find a clearly delimited departmental field. Hunt, who had come to the east from the open prairie [from Huron College, South Dakota, with Hoyt Hudson], naturally said, "Don't fence me in." It was a great battle, in which the attacker's hard debating style was well contrasted with his opponent's more thoughtful and reflective approach. The Quarterly Journal contains the record of that fight. It left the members of the Eastern unmoved in the end, but this Conference was not exactly calm.

The terms are changed, no doubt, but the historic opposition or competition of Plato and the sophist rhetorician underlies much that plagues us in our pedagogy and research even now. Form vs content? Well not in those terms perhaps. But Chi square vs. Union Square, shall we say, or gamesman tournament debating versus informed, enlightened, imaginative public examination of serious public questions.

Hunt, now in his ninety-first year, is still in the argument though with a modesty worthy of his age. Technique and instrumental skills of course, but always directly in service of enlargement of ideas and the promulgation of principle. Earlier this year he wrote me about some productive activities that certain bright young scholars were seeking to advance by attaching them to his name. "One of my major concerns now," he wrote, "is that classical scholarship in rhetoric is becoming a sort of footnote scholarship with no concern about ideas that may have meaning today. I am concerned about future meanings of Platonism in particular. Do I dare say anthing to . . [these young scholars] about wanting our scholarship to be concerned with enduring ideas?" And I replied, as you might

expect, "I think highly of your telling them that their scholarship should make itself an instrument for exploring and preserving and interpreting enduring ideas."

Coping with the generation and movement of ideas through discourse in the public arena, Hunt would have it, has been and must be the primary business of significant rhetorical studies--and perhaps of communication studies generally. That must be so whether they are historical or contemporary, whether developed in the competition of Protestant Reformation and Roman Catholic dogma and governance, or of enlightened democracy in Periclean Athens and barbarian darkness elsewhere, or in the urge of American colonists for full English liberty, or in the development of doctrines and circumstances of racial equality in early nineteenth century or late twentieth century America, or in the conflict of Keynesian and supplyside economics. Exhibition of the technology of rhetorical discourse, whether elaborated in the neoclassic rubric of Renaissance criticism, or the neoAristotilian armory of socalled traditional rhetorical methods, or the behavioral-statistical manipulations of communication science--such exhibition is either illuminating of the genesis, growth, and spread of ideas, or it is a game played for the sake of the game, no matter how many Ph.D's have blossomed and may blossom in the process. But, of course, from O'Neill to Etcetera the Younger the pursuit of form in teaching and research--of technical command of the resources

of commmunication--has had the special attraction of relative ease and the comfortable virture of indisputably measurable results. But doubtless I am imposing on Hunt in order to preach my own homily--the text for which I found in the Gospel According to Everett years ago.

But I drift away from our franchise for this program. Let us get back to the CSSA. I migrated to the Central States in 1937 (Auer and Howell, native sons, were already here, in Ohio and Wisconsin), and I settled at Washington University in St. Louis as successor to our late distinguished colleague Karl Wallace. Immediately my old friend Wilbur Gilman of the University of Missouri welcomed me into the Central States, shanghied me into the Speech Association of Missouri, and saw to it that I attended the conference of the Central States Speech Association at Columbia, Mo., on April 1 and 2, 1938. From then on I've been around most of the time. It's been a time of remarkable growth, diversification, and change. Thumb through the program you have in your hands, or glance at the chart of the convention on the center pages, not to see where you could be better occupied if you could slip out of this room unobserved, but to get a sense of the extent and variety of the almost eighty sessions offered in these three days. Then contemplate the program of 1938 at the University of Missouri, about 400 people attending. The whole convention program is preserved on two pages of the Quarterly Journal of Speech for 1938, and

the program of the Eastern Conference, printed just ahead of it, was only a little longer than ours. We had eleven separate sessions in the two days, mostly devoted to operational problems and speech education. They included dramatics, speech correction, oral interpretation, debate and discussion, rhetoric and public speaking, and radio. There were three sessions explicitly devoted to the teaching of speech, one to administrative problems and one to "persistent problems in speech." The only session given over to papers arising out of scholarly research (though a touch of it may have shown here and there in other sessions) was that on Rhetoric and Public Speaking. It offered five papers, four of them on American speakers--Jonathan Edwards, Charles Sumner, Samuel Gompers, and William Jennings Bryan--and one on the eighteenth-century Englishman, Lord Chesterfield,by the refugee from the East, Donald Bryant. The distinguished performance in that session was Orville Hitchcock's. You know that every so often, usually after an especially bad routine reading of a long paper, we hear disgusted protests that a bunch of speech teachers ought to be able to make speeches, ought to be able to deliver their discourses without script. Well, as I remember that session, Orville Hitchcock not only delivered his analysis of Jonathan Edwards without dependence on his script, but he appeared to have his speech so well memorized that he delivered it as Edwards or Bryan might have delivered a sermon or a convention oration. No doubt that is the way some kinds of learned performances should be given by some kinds of speakers. Not me.

I'll stick to the text (or at least seem to) even now. Scholarly presentations ought to be composed in sensitive consideration of the live audience and the circumstances of the live audience and the circumstances of the occasion at hand, of course, though too often they are not; but the sense of premeditation, thoughtfulness, and precision implied by a carefully composed paper well read seem to me no less desirable in our scholarly presentations than in those of the more reclusive scholars in history, philosophy, economics, and literature.

Well constituted and propelled and expertly guided by the time of that, its fourth or fifth conference in 1938, this the youngest of the regional speech associations was not long in becoming the most populous and the most productive of the four. CSSA as a regional association tended to pay special attention in its annual meetings to the interests and problems of secondary school and primary school teachers, whom the national conventions could not attract in great numbers. It has not, however, or so it seems to me, ever developed distinctly regional tones and features, as the other three elder associations have. Its conventions and its journal, rather more obviously than those of the other three, seem to me to have been smaller versions--or perhaps I should say springtime versions--of those of the national, comparable to the Middlewest MLA. Perhaps that is because the Middlewest, the land of the Big Ten, or more broadly the whole Central States area, has established the national norm for our several fields. The CSSA, as the index

to your program shows amply, like the other regional associations, does not hesitate to people the panels in its meetings with speakers from outside its own geographical area. I took part at the Southern last April on a panel on which all three speakers were non-Southerners (by invitation, not competition). Still, we in the CSSA seem to attract to our meetings uninvited attenders and observers from everywhere. I remember, for example, one year when the SAA held its convention in the summer--perhaps in Boston or Denver in August. That year the CSSA hastened to take up the vacated December spot in Chicago. (It's hard for some of the younger of you to believe, perhaps, and painful for others to recall that for most of our history we met in national convention assembled December 27-30 each year. We chose to travel in the worst of blizzard and zero weather and the most congested of transport and to consume a considerable part of our midwinter vacation to get away for half a week or more from the domestic excitement of post-Christmas litter and uproar.) At the CSSA convention in Chicago, whom should I encounter almost as soon as I entered the Hotel but Wilbur Gilman, Chairman at Queens College, New York City. Wilbur was a transplanted CSSAer, of course, and he had also that excuse for convention hopping trotted out by department chairmen--recruiting. The real truth is, however, that Gilman and others like him were there because they couldn't feel right about a Christmas holiday without the challenge of winter holiday train travel and professional

companionship and intellectual stimulation of a speech convention.

* * * * *

Landmark developments in the substance and scholarship of our professions over the lifetime of the CSSA? Of course, but most of them not so obvious as the rise of radio, television, electrical amplification, and computer technology. The most pervasive change is one I have already called attention to--the flooding proliferation and diversification of our interests and our instructional and investigative activities. Inspite of the national secession first of "Speech Correction," as it was called, and then dramatics and theatre into their own organizations, our academic offerings and our research have multiplied at an astonishing rate. Run through the departmental course offerings of any of the big ten universities, for instance, and scan the titles of Ph.D. dissertations in the professions, for a sense of our ingenuity of innovation. The surge came especially with an emancipation from the limitations of orality and of <u>public</u> discourse as our primary fields, and the subsequent adaptation of the concepts, methods, and objectives of the behavioral sciences to the study of speech-speech communication--communication. Another innovation of considerable force and influence grew from the base of "debate and discussion," as textbooks and courses tended to be called, through group discussion and the various psychotherapies associated with the Bethel, Maine cult, to the present thriving,popular study

of small groups and interpersonal communication. If I have got the sequence and genealogy wrong, many of you will be able to correct me.

The studies and instruction in which I may perhaps profess intimate acquaintace if not expertise, rhetoric and public address, have also, like the profession at large, expanded and sophisticated admirably. From being the principal subjects of our attention half a century ago, they have receded, it sometimes appears, to the status of modest concessionnaires. But they have always had a salutary power of comeback. I remember looking through the national convention program at Cleveland in 1938 and finding the light of rhetoric under a bushel if burning at all. Upon encountering A.Craig Baird, President for 1939 and in command of programming, "Your Excellency," I said, "How about a rhetoric concession next year in Chicago?" "Good," he replied, "You arrange it." (That's the way programs were made in those days.) I did; and the result was the heavyweight panel whose performance we published by subscription as Papers in Rhetoric (1940). You may have stumbled onto it in your bibliographizing. The seeming decline in rhetorical studies comes about not, as some of their competitors allege, because of sterile, backward outlook and routine, worn-out methodology. Those diseases infect all kinds of studies, even as the pursuit of novel, superficiality, and ease entice the incompetent or lazy into new studies. The reconception of rhetorical studies, which may look to us ancients like decline, is in

fact the reduction of attention to individual public rhetors and discrete rhetorical artifacts studied in time, circumstances, and climates of opinion on the one hand, and on the other an amplified enthusiasm for all manner of rhetorical vehicles and potential influences functioning in the definition and propulsion of any and all public and domestic and private communication.

The History and Criticism of American Public Address (1944), organized by our national association and edited by Norwood Brigance, and the follow-up volume edited by Marie Nichols (1955), though by no means the first important scholarly work in rhetorical studies published in our first half century, established our commitment and competence in historical and critical scholarship. Successors to these volumes, with and without our association's sponsorship and fatherhood, have confirmed our citizenship in the republic of learning. But change, and often improvement, as the generations of scholars change is the desirable norm. I find it gratifying that those fine scholars who were once my graduate students have much transformed and notably refined anything that I could have put before them. If works with the general intent of the Brigance and Nichols volumes were to be undertaken today, they would be notably different from those done forty years ago. The conceptions and insights of the chapters would be more sophisticated, less parochial--more of Namier and his successors in history, less of Macaulay and Bancroft.

The pull of the contemporary is strong and valuable, and rhetorical studies have much to contribute to the explication of things of today, tomorrow, and next week. But it is understanding of the past furnishing a matrix for the raw data of the present that makes possible whatever preparation for the future or advance knowledge of it we can achieve. "People will not look forward to posterity who never look backward to their ancestors," said an old friend of mine, Edmund Burke, with whom I have spent more than the lifetime of CSSA. As we look ahead, therefore, there will still be a place in rhetorical history, I earnestly hope (perhaps even predict) for the likes of Bower Aly's Alexander Hamilton in the age of Ritter and Andrew's American Ideology: . . . Reflections on the Revolution in American Rhetoric; and for such examination of notable artefacts as my essay on Edmund Burke's Letter to the Sheriffs of Bristol along with Ed Blacks's "Sentimental Style as Escapism: or the Devil With Dan'l Webster."

Fifty years from now even Ritter, Andrews, and Black will probably seem old hat to your bright new scholarly grandchildren, What the headgear then will look like, or whether rhetorical scholars will even have heads, or only electronic keyboards, I won't predict.---Yes, the first fifty years are the hardest--until you sample the next half century.